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NOTES AND COMMENTS.

I.

THE DEFACTION OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

IN THE first edition of Mrs. Gaskell's "Life of Charlotte Brontë" she declares that the shadow cast upon the hitherto-peaceful family in the Haworth parsonage by Branwell's intrigue with his employer's wife had much to do with the morbid strain of melancholy that tinged his sister's life and letters.

"All her life was labor and pain," writes a school friend, "and she never threw down the burden for the sake of present pleasure."

In 1877 appeared "Charlotte Brontë, a Monograph," by T. Wemyss Reid, claiming as authority Miss Brontë's hitherto-unpublished letters to Ellen Nussey, her life-long confidante. According to this writer, "Currer Bell's" two terms in the Brussels ("Villette") pension of M. and Mme. Héger were "the turning-point in her career, and its true history and meaning are to be found in 'Villette,' the master-work of her mind, and the revelation of the most vivid passages in her own heart's history. . . . Her spirit, if not her heart, had been captured and held captive in the Belgian city."

Confession to this effect is eliminated from a sentence written by Charlotte to her friend. The sisters were recalled from Brussels by the death of their aunt. Emily assumed the place of the deceased as housekeeper, and Charlotte went back to prosecute the studies which were to enable her to carry out the cherished project of opening a school at Haworth. Years afterward she writes: "I returned to Brussels against my conscience, prompted by what seemed then an irresistible impulse. I was punished for my selfish folly by a total withdrawal, for more than two years, of happiness and peace of mind."

"The truth must be told," says Mr. Reid. "I see nothing in it which affects her fame and honor. . . . With that heart-history weighing upon her she began to write again, stirred by deeper thoughts," etc.

Mr. Augustine Birrell, in 1887, goes a step further. Agreeing with Mr. Reid that Charlotte's true life is written between the lines in "Villette," he oracularly advises those who thus read "to hold their tongues about their discoveries, real or supposed, and their surmises, however shrewd or keen." He likewise quotes the passage from Charlotte's letter to Miss Nussey, given above, and proceeds to divulge his discovery or surmise:

"Brussels was" (during this second sojourn) "a disappointing failure. It was not what she hoped it would be when, against the voice of conscience, she returned alone after her aunt's death. Madame Héger became estranged. Miss Brontë got on better with the husband. In fact, although her shyness stood in the way of her wishes, she was one of those women whose sympathies go out easier [*sic*] to men than to those of their own sex, and whose intellects work better in male than in female company."

"Madame Héger was also, besides being a woman, as determined a Roman Catholic as was Charlotte a fierce Protestant. . . . Madame, in the opinion of her pupil-teacher, was an idolator; and what Miss Brontë was in Madame Héger's—it is better *only guessing*!"

If a half-truth be the worst of libels, the passage I italicize should suffice to blacken the "fame" and destroy the "honor" of her whose partisan Mr. Reid professes to be, while giving the theme upon which Mr. Birrell plays such flippant vari-

ations. More honorable, because more outspoken, than his fellow-monographist, Mr. Birrell "puts a name to" the man. In what the true artist protests against as an unwarrantable assumption and violation of the laws and etiquette of the guild, he asserts that, in her greatest book, the author turned her still-raw heart inside out to the touch of the curious and the biting breath of the critic. Forgetful of the minor fact that Charlotte, as Jane Eyre, had already married Rochester, Reid and Birrell identify her as Lucy Snowe, and show her to be in love with Paul Emmanuel, the *alter ego* of Madame Hégér's husband. Back of the heroic daughter and loving wife we have honored in the great novelist, lies an ugly story that changes the radiance of genius into the flame flickering above a shallow, shameful grave.

Lest we should still hug our doubt of this monstrous thing, we are next confronted with an English letter in a late number of *The Critic*, upon "The Home of Charlotte Brontë," signed "L. B. Walford." She affirms:

"Paul Emmanuel is still alive, and but recently delivered up, among other curiosities, a number of essays composed both by Charlotte and Emily Brontë while under his charge at Brussels, and corrected and emended by him as their master. These essays are upon no account to get into print, and it is easy to discern why. Although Charlotte's letters to her preceptor are, it is feared, by this time destroyed, no letter could breathe more transparently and more unconsciously the emotions by which that proud yet tender spirit was torn in twain than does one of the short papers which I saw the other day at Ilkley. The elaborate epistle in which Monsieur Hégér detailed his reasons for turning a deaf ear to all petitions on the subject was not required by me, after one brief perusal of the little essay. The refusal breathes a high and chivalrous tone, and with the motive one can find no fault, but, apart from publicity, it is sad to think that neither letters nor essays were treasured for their own sakes by the Brussels schoolmaster. It almost makes one's blood boil to think of that warm, imaginative, hungry and thirsty girlish heart, beating against its bars, underrated and misunderstood by the sprightly, amiable, but withal undiscerning and self-opinionated man who was its ideal. . . . He is a bright, vain, handsome octogenarian, charming and delighting to charm, eager to talk, and as eager for an audience, as exacting of homage and subservience as in the days when schoolgirls trembled at his glance. Imagine him fifty years ago, and you can hardly go wrong in imagining a very fascinating personage; then recollect that fifty years ago or thereabouts the little Yorkshire nursery governess took her first flight to Brussels, and there beheld Paul Emmanuel—*et voilà tout!*"

Herein is mystery! That which a brief perusal of one little essay betrayed to our letter-writer was a sealed book to the bright, vain Frenchman. What, then, were the reasons detailed in an elaborate epistle for refusing to surrender to print and the public the essays emended and preserved (ignorantly) by him? Let us con judiciously the proofs in support of the theory rolled, like an unctuous morsel, under the tongue of each of our latter-day biographers.

1. Charlotte's frank confession, already quoted. Put we side by side with this an extract from another letter to Ellen Nussey, written soon after Charlotte's return. "If I *could* leave home, I should not be at Haworth. Life is passing away, and I am doing nothing, earning nothing! When I am able to leave home, I shall be quite past the prime of life, my faculties will be wasted, and my few acquisitions in a great measure forgotten. . . . When I consult my conscience, it affirms that I am right in staying at home, and bitter are its upbraidings when I yield to an eager desire for release."

The divine unrest of soul and imagination; the anguished beat against the bars of the caged eagle; the smothered seed "in the cold earth, quickening at heart and longing for the air"—need we look farther than these for explanation of the "total withdrawal of happiness and peace of mind"?

Or, if the vulgar requisition for a lover in the case must be honored, was M. Hégér the only man she met in Brussels? Knowing the shy, proud spirit as some of us do, it is easier to believe that "one dear, fatal name" was never breathed except in prayer than that she bewailed in print her unrequited affection for another woman's husband.

There are still souls so pure, and unhackneyed by sophistical cant of elective affinities, that they see little difference between the "emotions by which this proud and tender spirit was torn in twain," and the passion that led her dying brother to "stuff his pockets" with a married woman's love-letters.

2. Mr. Reid details the tedious stages of the travail that produced "Villette"—caused, he asserts, by afflictive memories. Yet he transcribes this passage: "I have sometimes desponded and almost despaired because there was no one to whom to read a line, or of whom to ask a counsel. 'Jane Eyre' was not written under such circumstances, nor were two-thirds of 'Shirley.'" Mrs. Gaskell says: "The pen laid down when there were three sisters, alive and loving, was taken up when one alone remained." Charlotte named the chapter that began that last third of "Shirley," "The Valley of the Shadow of Death." Why conjure other shades to haunt it?

3. M. Héger was Paul Emmanuel. "Lucy Snowe is the truest picture of the real Charlotte Brontë," Charlotte's merry allusions in her letters to "the little man whom none of you like" do not mar the unities of the hypothesis that she loved M. Héger, returned to Brussels for his sake, was convicted and sent home "suddenly" by his wife, whom Charlotte "paid off" by writing her up as Madame Beck. Why, then, does Mr. Reid brand as "bitter and shameful words when applied to one of the truest and purest of women," and Birrell as "nauseous and malignant hypocrisy," the critique of the *Quarterly Review* upon "Jane Eyre"? "If we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex."

This woman, who, thirty-six years ago, laid down for all time the pen that was seldom wielded for self-defence, once wrote a letter to a reviewer who called himself friendly. I copy it entire without comment, *apropos* to the query whether she was in love with M. Héger:

"To G. H. LEWES, Esq.:

"I can be on my guard against my enemies, but GOD deliver me from friends!—
CURRER BELL."

MARION HARLAND.

II.

LYMAN BEECHER AND INFANT DAMNATION.

I ASK leave to correct a statement of Mr. C. K. Tuckerman concerning my father, Dr. Lyman Beecher, in THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW for January, 1890. It occurs in an account of a sermon which he alleges he heard my father deliver. The statement is that, after describing the horrors of hell, etc., the preacher spoke of a mother who had failed to have her child baptized. The child was killed through the carelessness of a nurse, and my father is represented as saying: "That child, who might have been an angel in heaven, is now, through the negligence of its parents in the matter of baptism, a tenant of hell"; whereupon one man is said to have marched out of the church.

This statement represents my father as believing and teaching (1) that an infant is regenerated and fitted for heaven by baptism; (2) that if not baptized it becomes a tenant of hell. It also represents (3) that apparently but one man dissented from those statements; and (4) that the congregation disapproved of his dissent and sympathized with the preacher.

If Mr. Tuckerman had represented himself as having heard Dr. Channing renounce Unitarianism, and teach orthodoxy to his people with their unanimous applause, it could not be more incredible or contrary to fact than these allegations concerning my father. His position on this question of infant damnation was as well known as that of Dr. Channing on Unitarianism. Soon after his settlement in Boston, in 1826, my father became satisfied that efforts were being extensively made to check the progress of orthodoxy by alleging that its advocates held and taught the damnation of infants. To meet this allegation, he published in 1827 the following statement in a note to his sermon on the government of God:

"I am aware that Calvinists are represented as believing and teaching the monstrous doctrine that infants are damned, and that hell is doubtless paved with their bones. But, having passed the age of fifty, and been conversant for thirty years with the most approved Calvinistic writers, and personally acquainted with many of the most distinguished Calvinistic divines in New England and in the